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How to make universities more inclusive? Hire more working-class academics

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For several years, higher education institutions have been putting in place **widening participation initiatives**. These are designed to help address low levels of under-represented students applying to university. Such initiatives have led to **increasing numbers** of working-class students going on to higher education. Often, these students are the first in their family to go to university.

Not knowing what to expect at university, some of these students worry they **might not fit in**, or that they will not be able to **afford their studies**. Others say they have to carefully consider their book purchases and fear they will **visibly stand out from the other students**.

But research for my latest book, *Experiences of Academics from a Working-Class Heritage*, revealed that academics from similar working-class backgrounds have a natural and intuitive instinct to quickly recognise working-class students. As such, they are able to empathise and understand the needs and issues these students have.

The working-class academics I spoke with explained that their background gave them the ability to do this. They also revealed how they discreetly observed and connected with working-class students –

Author



Carole Binns

Lecturer in the Faculty of Management,
Law and Social Sciences, University of
Bradford

perhaps by revealing their own background during a one-to-one tutorial – and how they mitigated student fears and anxieties in the classroom and across the campus.

Looking out for students

Nearly all the academics I spoke to said they wanted to make the university experience rewarding for their students. They explained that this was done without favour as they felt it important that all students receive a good learning experience. But they were aware of how working-class students might feel on arrival. This was often based on the academics' own university experiences as a working-class student.

One interviewee explained that they were familiar with how financial struggles or pressures from home could affect the ability to study and attend classes. This could be a result of having child-caring responsibilities or looking after an ailing parent or grandparent.



My research indicates that working-class students and academics avoid top universities. GaudiLab/Shutterstock

Another participant talked about a potential student who was attending a required university day. The applicant did not appear to be comfortable. So the interviewee “made an effort to allay her fears” because she was in the same situation that the interviewee had been in many years ago, and “she had the right to be there, just like everybody else, if she had the grades”.

Other interviewees recalled how they had been told, as teenagers, that they could never study the subject they aspired to because they were from a working-class background. Now, as academics, they encouraged applicants from the same social class to apply for those subjects and not to rule anything out.

Widening participation

Almost all of the research participants said they noticed working-class students and felt a strong sense of empathy with them. In particular, they could sense and predict how the students would probably feel while studying at a higher education institution.

Of course, this knowledge is not confined to academics from a working-class background as there are good, intuitive teachers from all social classes. But some common life experiences do not need explaining.



Too many poorer students feel they don't fit in at university, but working-class academics can help.
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This is why one way of increasing student diversity is to recruit more academics who are from these backgrounds. Yet social and economic class is not one of the nine protected characteristics included in the Equality Act 2010 and used by employers. This information is there to ensure there is equal opportunity when appointing new staff. As such, there are calls for changes in the employment legislation to address the fact that academics who have a working-class background are better able to “recognise and support the particular needs of these students”.

Indeed, the Social Mobility Commission recommends that data about the socio-economic background of employees should be collected and monitored by employers – in the same way that disability and ethnicity data is.

Until this becomes an established practice, interrogating National Student Surveys remains paramount. It is also important to find out if students prefer to be allocated to (especially in a one-to-one situation) a lecturer or personal academic tutor who is from a similar class. This would help to locate where current good practice lies or predict where future problems might develop. And it would demonstrate universities' commitment to listening to voices that have previously been unheard.